Informal Settlements as Spatial Outcomes of Everyday Forms of Resistance: The Case of Three Depressed Communities in Quezon City

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Informal settlements in the past decades have become ubiquitous features of the Philippine urban landscape that are commonly perceived in a negative light in Filipino popular culture. This paper puts forward a countervailing argument that more than being places of blight and despair, these communities, in reality, can not only be considered as the product of the urban poor's need to access a scarce resource (i.e., living space) but also as spatial outcomes of a disadvantaged group's continuing resistance against the state and the more socioeconomically advantaged sectors, particularly with respect to how resources in society should be distributed. Through key informant interviews and field observations in the informal settlements of Lookan, Mehan and Labrador[1] in Quezon City, I argue that the methods employed by the residents of informal communities enable them to appropriate for themselves urban space that they do not legally own, and in the process utilize, develop, manage, and protect these usurped lands into viable spaces for living. Moreover, residents make a living in the areas they occupy without either the approval of its legal owners or the direct supervision and management of the state. These strategies reflect characteristics that are similar to activities that political scientist James C. Scott (1985) has classified as "the weapons of the weak" or the "everyday forms of resistance" of marginalized groups and adds a geographic component to the said paradigm.

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INTRODUCTION

As of 2007 there were 11.5 million people living in Metropolitan Manila (MM), and their number currently grows at an average annual rate of 2.11% (National Statistics Office, 2010). MM's rapid growth mirrors the experience of many cities in developing countries. This includes the emergence of informal settlements that are scattered over the seventeen local government units of the National Capital Region (NCR) (Shatkin, 2006). Current estimates indicate that residents in these communities account for anywhere from one-third to two-fifths of the NCR population (Racelis & Aguirre, 2005).

Quezon City (QC), NCR's largest local government unit in terms of population and land area, is home to the largest population of informal settlers, and their numbers continue to grow rapidly. In 2002, there were an estimated 170,000 depressed households in the city, and as of August 2010 the number of informal settler families is said to have already reached more than 223,000 (Quezon City Urban Poor Affairs Office, 2010). For the most part, they cluster together and form communities along danger areas (i.e., along waterways, under bridges), government properties, open spaces, and private lands.

The ubiquity of these informal settlements has resulted in these places becoming part of Philippine society's popular consciousness (Shatkin, 2006). Yet despite their being a component of the urban landscape, these areas which many of those who cannot afford decent housing call home are largely forgotten, marginalized and suffer from very negative perceptions by outsiders (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005; Starke, 1996). Local governments rarely keep up-to-date information on them through socioeconomic censuses (Ballesteros, 2009). If ever they are part of official local policy, they are treated more as a problem, eye sores in the midst of cities attempting to become "modern" (Inter-Agency Meeting on Demolition and Resettlement, 2010). Even the labels or descriptions assigned to them in Philippine society, such as "depressed area", "blighted area", "squatters", "nesting area of crime", among others, indicate that these settlements are stigmatized places (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005). These negative outlooks have the effect of ostracizing and dismissing those whose lives are inextricably associated with such settlements (Starke, 1996).

While these images of hopelessness, poverty, and blight cannot be disputed, this paper attempts to go beyond these notions, suggesting another way of looking

at these urban landscapes. By providing both a short history of how three informal settlements of Quezon City were established and a detailed description of the economic and residential spaces that have developed within the often-concealed *looban* or interior of these three sites, this study seeks to demonstrate that the evolution and continued existence of these slum areas are inherently the spatial outcomes of subordinate groups' *weapons of the weak* and of everyday resistance to society's elite interpretation of them together with its institutions.

The Evolution of Informal Settlements Studies in the Philippines

Initial research on depressed areas in Philippine cities such as the work of Lansang (1951), sought to generate a greater understanding of slums and foster compassion for its residents through descriptive studies. Succeeding investigations eventually challenged notions that slums are mere physical manifestations of dilapidated and blighted houses on usurped land. These studies argued that these places were part of city environments and should be understood as a means for low-income migrants to adjust to or survive city life. Jocano (2002) asserted that slum areas should be best seen as a process of adaptation wherein poor migrants from rural areas utilize their environment in order to survive and reproduce. While he also discusses the spatial features of these settlements, Jocano's work focused more on the "social organization, values, expectations, normative behavior (and) moral order" (2002, p. 6) that tend to be produced in such places. Such views of informal settlements reinforces the contentions of Laquian (1968) that slum areas, despite the negative connotations associated with their structures and overall environment, commonly have members possessing a strong sense of community. He further adds that this intense level of closeness and camaraderie can be employed to address slum-related issues through urban community development. Similar studies that focused more on the inhabitants of the slum than the slum itself includes the work of Keyes (1974), which raised the notion that the urban poor are also citizens whose deplorable living conditions should be the concern of well-conceived, state-sponsored policy interventions.

Such work on informal settlements was soon followed by research that argued that inhabitants of such places are also citizens and thus have a right to better living conditions in the form of improvements in health, education and

other basic services as well as in obtaining title to the land that they occupy (Berner, 1997; Racelis, 2008).

More studies, a majority of which examine the activities of urban poor communities organized into people's organizations in partnership with non-governmental organizations, can also be considered as reflections of acts of resistance by marginalized groups. Starke (1996) posits that, contrary to popular notions, the urban poor are not merely willing recipients of government resettlement programs. Many are able to organize themselves to resist relocation, demolition, and even propose alternative measures that would better benefit them. Aberia (1997) provides cases wherein the urban poor can acquire both land and shelter by utilizing provisions in the legal system, while Berner (1997) points out that squatter communities do utilize the intense social relations among its members as a means to organize themselves and lobby for rights over the spaces they currently occupy. Moreover, works of Antolihao (2004), Racelis and Aguirre (2005) and Veneracion (2008), offer current experiences with respect to slum upgrading, an approach wherein urban poor residents remain onsite and with secure tenure improve their houses and gain access to better basic services and facilities.

Slums as Places of Resistance

It cannot be denied that the abovementioned activities and achievements of organized informal settlers to improve their tenure status and living conditions can be considered a form of resistance against people and institutions that question their right to decent living space. Yet such a struggle need not be the sole preserve of organized groups. While initial research on Philippine slums sought to reveal that the development of such communities were adaptive mechanisms employed by its residents in order to survive in a unique setting, it could also be argued that members of the underprivileged who live and develop informal settlements, similar to peasants in rural areas who seize the farmlands of their landlords, are merely asserting their right to live with dignity and security (Kerkvliet, 1991). As such, when people appropriate for themselves land parcels that they do not own in order to meet a basic human need, such as housing (Turner, 1976), their actions become not only an expression of their *right to survive*, which for its adherents, has precedence over other concerns (Szanton, 1972). More importantly, they also become a spatial reflection of a marginalized group's resistance against the

dominant economic and legal values of the state and the more privileged classes (Kerkvliet, 1991).

Using James C. Scott's (1985) concept of *the weapons of the weak*, a framework that he utilized in explaining the everyday resistance of members of the farming class against the elite in agrarian Malaysia, this paper contributes to the literature on Philippine informal settlements by demonstrating that the more gradual, rather unplanned and covert process of appropriation by the disadvantaged class of lands legally owned by public and private entities and their continuous effort to develop these places into thriving communities are the result of a spatial, albeit indirect form of defiance against the state and its more privileged members. As such, this research reveals that the actions and activities that lead to the occupation, use, and even development of scarce urban land is a weapon that underprivileged groups could employ to fulfill their basic need for living space and that urban poor resistance need not always be in the form of overt social movements. Moreover, this research contributes to the literature on Philippine urban geography and resource use by explaining how space in crowded places could be creatively utilized for capital and investment purposes without having to provide obligations to the state (i.e., business permits, taxes).

The physical sites of my research are the informal settlements of Lookan, Mehan and Labrador, all of which are found in Quezon City (See Figure 1.) that I frequented as a volunteer during the campaign period of the May 2010 national and local elections. Unlike other depressed areas such as those found in Tondo, Manila and North Triangle, Quezon City that receive periodic media attention, the aforementioned settlements are similar to other slum communities in urban areas that the general public may not be aware of.

METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Geographers are concerned with how ordinary social interactions create places and how people create worlds by occupying these spaces. These objectives are commonly realized through the use of ethnographic research methods such as semi-structured interviews, photographs, participant observation and writing field notes (Watson & Till, 2010). Dunn (2000, p. 52) particularly cites the ability of interviews as a means to gain **"a**ccess to information about events, opinions and experiences" of marginalized people, while Kearns (2000) mentions the
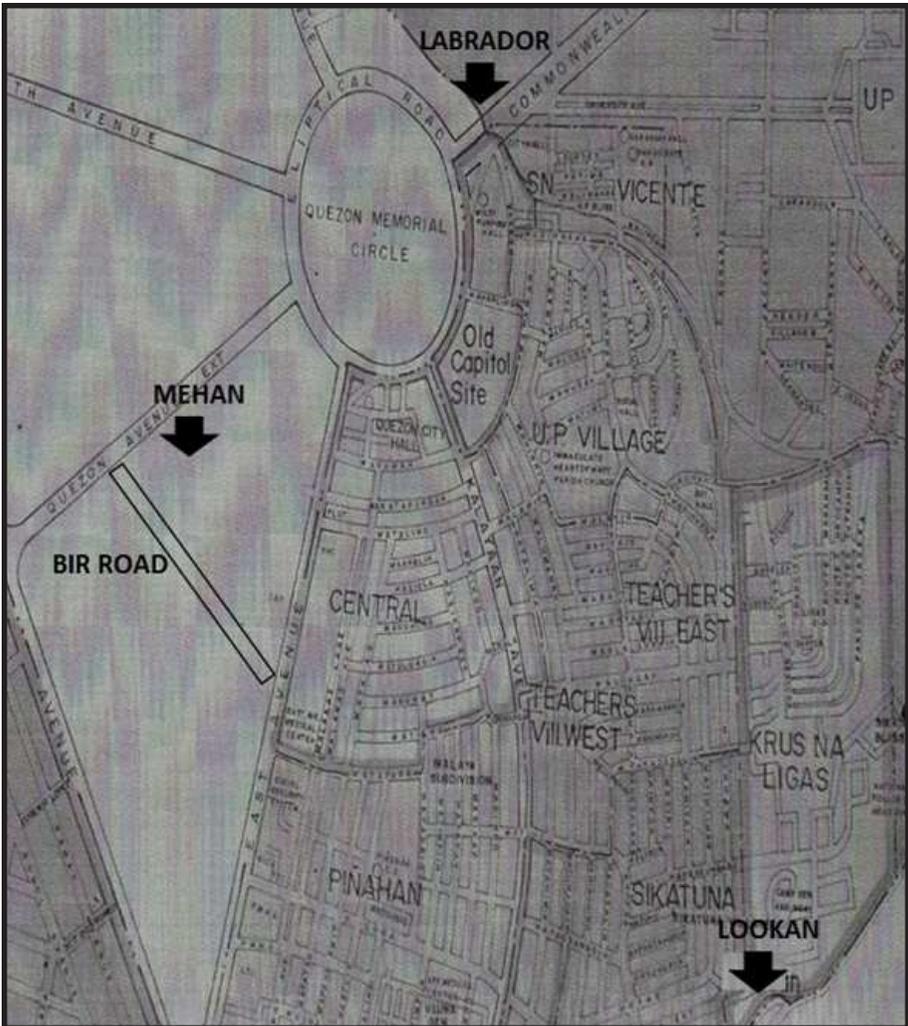
Figure 1. Map indicating the Lookan, Labrador and Mehan communities in Quezon City.
(Base map source: Maphouse Marketing. With minor modifications by the author.)

value of participant observation, which includes all types of observation, as a complement to interview results and as an aid in better understanding places. In like manner, most information regarding informal settlements, where documentary data rarely exists (Ballesteros, 2009), were effectively generated using interviews and field observation such as in the works of Aguirre and Racelis (2005), Jocano (2002) and Berner (1997). Given their suitability in the

conduct of qualitative research and applicability in previous studies on depressed areas, I primarily employed both key informant interviews of old-time residents and field observations in the three aforementioned communities to gather and cross-validate my data.

Entry and access to these settlements were made possible by the familiarity and trust that I developed with three field coordinators (FC) who were long-time residents of these settlements and who acted as liaison officers for a local politician. These individuals served as my "gatekeepers" (Kearns, 2000, p. 114) who referred me to other respondents and who accompanied me in my visits to these communities. These FCs, who were also my respondents, referred me to thirteen other key informants (KI) who were selected primarily because they were a) pioneer settlers or long-time residents of their respective communities and/or b) were involved or had knowledge of how portions of these areas were turned into spaces other than for residential purposes. Except for four respondents who preferred to be interviewed in their places of work, all conversations were conducted in informants' homes and were recorded through note-taking. This method was employed to reduce the possibility that the respondents would be intimidated and feel vulnerable in having their statements audio-recorded and to ensure that no data will be erased (Dunn, 2000).

All sixteen interviews were of a semi-structured type. Interviews with nine pioneers and long-time residents lasted between forty-five to seventy minutes, while those who appropriated, exchanged and managed spaces within depressed areas for commercial purposes did not exceed fifteen minutes since they were interviewed while they were taking a break from their work. The informants responded mainly to queries relating to 1) the history of their settlement and what means were used to gain entry to these places, 2) the personal history of how the KI and his relations settled into the area, 3) the period wherein people began to stay in their area in large numbers, 4) the accepted practices in their community with respect to: a) occupying and claiming space; b) methods of accessing, locating and carving spaces for basic services and amenities; 5) the appropriation and exchange of economic spaces or places for making a living that were not being officially taxed by the government; and 6) the protection and management of these spaces.

These interviewers were complemented by field observations within the Lookan, Mehan and Labrador communities before and after discussions with

key informants. Each session lasted between one to two hours and included photo-documentation activities that were approved by the FC and the residents who were within the vicinity of the photographed area. These observations sought to help me familiarize myself with my study areas as well as to identify unique features of each site such as segregated commercial areas, unique business establishments (i.e., dental clinic, laundry service), noticeable signs of rental housing and the location of structures that provide basic services and amenities. Field observations also helped add follow-up questions to my semi-structured interviews and to test the accuracy of my respondents' statements.
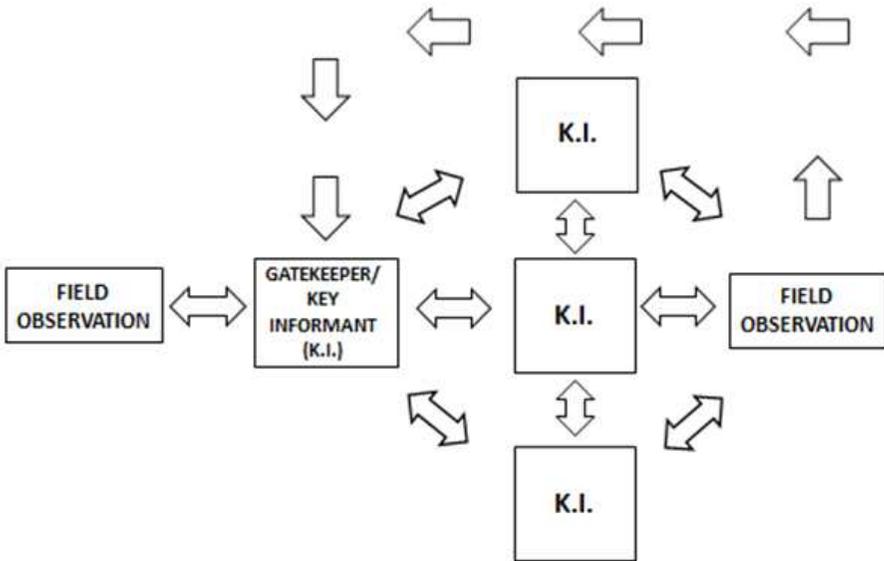

Figure 2. Illustration of the research process indicating the complementary relationship between field observations and key informant interviews.

Despite their obvious similarities, informal settlements are quite diverse (Berner, 1997), and the evolution, morphology and other characteristics of each depressed area has its own peculiarities. While I believe that the qualitative research methods that I have utilized have allowed me to document and understand what I intended to study, it does not follow that the insights generated and features of slums that I was able to identify through this research could represent other depressed areas in Metro Manila.

With respect to my key informants, all are long-time residents of their respective areas, none of whom was a marginal member of their community. Save for one interviewee, who is a long-time village council member, none of the informants can be considered as a person who wields influence on his community. Lack of time and familiarity with my businessperson key informants, who are not marginal members of their respective residences but whose social status I was not able to determine with certainty, made me unable to ask questions that could have allowed for the generation of more facts as to how they were able to access space for their livelihoods in such space constrained places.

The three field coordinators, on the other hand, cannot also be considered members of their respective community's elite. Residents see them more as go-betweens for the politician they work for, and, given their occupation, their main function is to have good relations with all members of the community. They would have nothing to gain from withholding other key informants from me, and, given more time, I would have had more chances to interview people that they could have recommended. If anything, time constraints and my dependence on the informants who were identified by my "gatekeepers" may have deprived me of other informants that may have further enriched and deepened my understanding of my study areas.

My research primarily focused on the history of settlement in slums as well as how spaces in depressed areas are accessed, allocated, used, exchanged and managed. For this reason, some aspects of informal settlements, such as the unequal socio-economic conditions and relations among its residents, which I recognize and which Kerkvliet (1991) mentions as a characteristic of underprivileged communities, have been left out. While my study of the business enterprises that exist within informal settlements seek to illustrate an alternative view of informal settlements as a place of economic activity, such observations do not take away the fact that such areas involve players who have a hard time making ends meet and that depressed areas do serve as a source of cheap, subsidized labor for enterprises and residences in urban areas. The limited amount and type of questions that I was able to ask also means that while I was able to properly trace the origins and initial development of the slums I have studied, my research could not determine with certainty if the additional entry of occupants over time in these places were either a product of spontaneous

movement or were controlled by certain individuals and groups within these settlements.

SCOTT'S *WEAPONS OF THE WEAK* AND INFORMAL SETTLER RESISTANCE AGAINST THE VALUES AND NOTIONS OF DOMINANT GROUPS

Scott (1985) argues that throughout history, non-dominant groups in society are rarely interested in openly changing "the larger structures of the state and the law" (p. xv), and, instead, were more keen on drawing as much benefits from the current system while minimizing their losses. These marginalized people were said to have at their disposal "everyday forms of resistance" that they employ in order to acquire much needed resources or to prevent the more dominant groups from exacting "labor, food, taxes, rents and interests" from them. These supposed "weapons of the weak" were a form of everyday class struggle by disadvantaged groups that a) avoids any direct resistance against more ascendant groups, b) requires no coordinated action or planning, c) relies on an implied agreement among members of informal networks, and d) is perpetuated by adherents who are individually difficult to identify. These weapons were useful because they could be utilized repeatedly as they do not attract undue attention from the authorities while nonetheless making the latter's policies ineffective. More importantly, the strategy allows the lower classes to advance their claims to resources, albeit marginally (Scott, 1985, pp. xvi, 33).

Although piecemeal squatting, as opposed to outright land invasion, was mentioned as a form of everyday, non-confrontational resistance, Scott's discussion of the marginalized sector's weapons of the weak lacked a spatial component. His work concentrated more on expressions of resistance like "backbiting, character assassination, rude nicknames and gestures, and silences of contempt" (Scott, 1985, pp. xvi, 32). He did not really look into the imprints of such types of resistance on the landscape. However, the current study details the process wherein poor people covertly take over vacant public or privately-owned urban land in a rather unplanned manner and transforms these into communities through the continuous appropriation, utilization, negotiation and protection of spaces. All of these fulfill the characteristics of Scott's weapons of the weak and provide a place-based dimension to the literature of everyday forms of resistance.

Members, groups and institutions of different statuses and affiliations within any society spend a significant amount of effort in determining "how resources should be used and by whom" (Kerkvliet, 1991, p. 11). More often not, those who belong to more dominant groups and institutions control and have access to vital assets. They are likewise able to legitimize and enforce their claims through the institutionalization of rules and principles on how such resources are distributed and utilized (Scott, 1990; Kerkvliet, 1991; Serote, 2004).

In the case of land resources, more privileged groups, along with institutions allied to them, have employed and disseminated the values of the capitalist system that espouses that it is "the market" that determines the price of all commodities and that "private property rights" should be respected (Kerkvliet, 1991, p. 249). On the surface, and even in practice, such notions about capital as a form of commodity and property seem to be generally accepted by society at large. The current skewed distribution of land in the Philippines, which is the result of allowing market forces and private interest to decide who gets to possess such parcels, reflects such an adherence to capitalist ideals to the extent that the stranglehold of private developers over the supply of land for residential purposes has made "land so inaccessible to most low-income families that squatting seems to be the only alternative available to them" (Serote, 2004, p. 83).

At first glance, the existence of informal settlements may seem more like the outcome of the need of low income groups to fulfill their basic requirements for shelter. But from another perspective, the continued existence and development of such communities reflects the resistance of underprivileged groups against certain notions and principles that ascendant groups and institutions promote. For one, while members of the propertied class and the state advocate the primacy of "private property and market value in resource distribution" (Kerkvliet, 1991, p. 17), the poor's usurpation of land, an act deemed illegal by the state, supports Kerkvliet's (1991) contention that while marginalized groups do work within the limits set by the market economy, its members also adhere to the belief that the basic rights of people to attain security and dignity take precedence over the rules of the market. People are said to have a responsibility to prevent any individual to "fall below some basic human level" since a person's right to survive is far more important than any economic or legal consideration (Szanton, 1972, pp. 129-130), and the informal settlement can be viewed as a reflection of such values.

The government and the propertied class may have categorized certain aspects of their society, such as slums and its inhabitants, as disorderly, threatening and contradictory to their notions of modernity (Antolihao, 2004). Yet the mere existence of these communities can likewise be perceived as an insurgent act that "contradicts the domain of conceived space" that is being perpetuated by the state and more powerful groups (Knudsen, 2007, p. 15). More importantly, Turner (1976, p. 5) points out that thriving informal settlements go against the belief of many governments that slum dwellers cannot do things on their own, such as when they turn their communities into "fully serviced suburbs" or when these residences become a means for them to fully participate in the urban economy.

Finally, the creation of residential and production land uses in depressed areas go against what the state perceives to be its functions and responsibilities. This becomes apparent when businesses and "real property" transactions within informal settlements deny the government of its authority to tax such productive activities. To a certain extent, slum dwellers also contradict the authorities when they find ways to allocate, arrange and maintain land uses and basic services within their communities without any formal supervision. All of these aforementioned contentions demonstrate that an informal settlement, from its occupants' clear physical violation of property rights and laws to the countervailing ideas that it represents (i.e., basic rights, right to survive, ability of people to do what is right for them) is a site where "class conflict…is played out" (Scott, 1985, p. 243) and where resistance occurs.

The conceptual framework found below (See Figure 3.) explains the three-phase process of what I call the spatial weapons of the weak in informal settlements. It begins with the premise that uncoordinated informal settler activities that are rooted in informal networks, non-confrontation, and unnoticed accretion are a product of individual self-help and family needs that allows its perpetrators to take hold of a much coveted resource – urban land. This strategy of avoiding attention and immediate indignation from private owners or the state represents a form of resistance by the subordinate class occupants. After gaining a foothold in their newly occupied land and through the continuous population increase within the area, the second phase of the informal settlers' resistance to authority begins. Here they go about appropriating, utilizing, exchanging, negotiating and protecting scarce informal settlement spaces into

land uses in a third phase which can be classified as spaces for living (residential/settlement land use) and spaces for making a living (production land use) (Serote, 2009). The resulting community clusters have attributes that are usually found in formal and privately-developed residential areas. While the community services and facilities that are built and acquired by members of an informal settlement seem to reflect conformity to the dominant class's notions of modernity, the fact that slum residents have been able to acquire such conveniences without the supervision and management of state planning institutions and without the consent of the land's legal owners make it another clear example of resistance by the subordinate class.
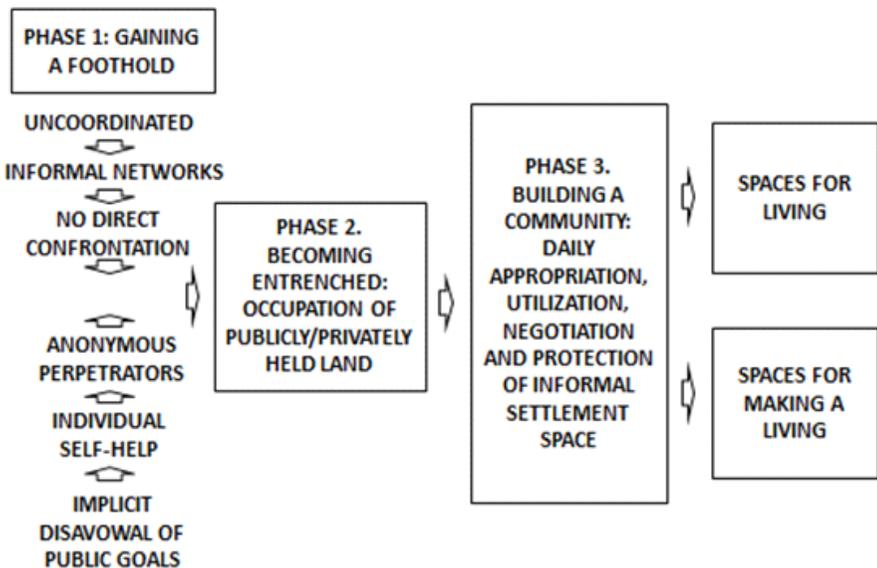
SPATIAL WEAPONS OF THE WEAK

PHASE 1: GAINING A FOOTHOLD

UNCOORDINATED

INFORMAL NETWORKS

NO DIRECT CONFRONTATION

PHASE 2. BECOMING ENTRENCHED: OCCUPATION OF PUBLICLY/PRIVATELY HELD LAND

ANONYMOUS PERPETRATORS

INDIVIDUAL SELF-HELP

IMPLICIT DISAVOWAL OF PUBLIC GOALS

PHASE 3. BUILDING A COMMUNITY: DAILY APPROPRIATION, UTILIZATION, NEGOTIATION AND PROTECTION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENT SPACE

SPACES FOR LIVING

SPACES FOR MAKING A LIVING

Figure 3. Spatial Weapons of the Weak.

GAINING A FOOTHOLD ON PRECIOUS LAND BY WORKING THE SYSTEM AND THROUGH UNNOTICED ACCRETION

As early as the Commonwealth era, the government was already experiencing difficulty alloting spaces for its growing population and institutions. It was during this period that Quezon City (QC), 7,000 hectares of land carved

out of the Province of Rizal and northeast of Manila, was created through Commonwealth Act 502 in 1939. Owing to its proximity to Manila and its large portions of undeveloped land, QC was intended to become the country's site of government. Although this was never fully implemented, the area is now the location of the main offices of many executive departments, government commissions, military camps and NGOs (Veneracion, 2008).

Even before the transfer of government institutions could commence, then President Manuel Quezon already began allotting spaces for socialized housing. In 1940, 439 units were turned over to working class families on a site called Barrio Obrero in Kamuning District (Alcazaren, 2011). Other residential developments soon followed, and these included upper and middle class neighborhoods along the city's southern boundary. Post-War government housing projects that were then established along the area's central portions were soon followed by private-sector-led subdivision developments in the north. Soon thereafter, the government started developing land within what is called the National Government Center (NGC). This included the construction of medical and educational services near NGC (Veneracion, 2008).

Manila-based residents and industries continued to relocate to QC in the 1960s and 1970s (Veneracion, 2008). Many of these activities and people were transferring into industrial, residential and unoccupied land. In turn, these developments attracted even more activities and people in search of better opportunities. It so happens that those who moved included the urban poor who, out of dire necessity (Serote, 2004) gravitates towards unoccupied lands proximate to residences, industries and offices that can provide them with opportunities. And once a settlement is established, it quickly becomes a magnet for other landless poor, grows at a rapid pace, and virtually entrenches itself as part of the landscape.

Based on oral accounts of key informants, the establishment and growth by accretion of the communities of Lookan, Labrador and Mehan occurred from the 1960s to the 1990s. The manner in which the pioneers gained a foothold in what used to be open, marginal land was done not by grabbing these lands outright but by appealing or entering into under-the-table and, supposedly, temporary agreements with individuals who were connected to particular institutions such as the National Tobacco Administration, in Labrador, and National Waterworks and Sewerage Administration, in the case of the Lookan settlement. Accordingly,

these enterprising individuals were able to work the system for their benefit at minimal cost. With the arrival of relatives and friends of the pioneers together with complete strangers, each settlement in the study was overrun by people who, through informal networks and driven by personal need, were able to gain enough numbers to control and establish themselves in their respective areas. In a sense, by taking over land that they do not own, would-be settlers exploit every opportunity given to them and try to determine what they can get away with (Scott, 1985).

The story of Brando, a long-time Lookan resident, supports these assertions. Brando used to reside in another slum along present-day Kamias Road. Upon the advice of a friend, he moved his family to Lookan in the 1960s, a barangay where properties of electric and water companies are located. These were near emerging middle class villages that became a source of service employment for many men and women in the settlement. He was able to build a relatively spacious house on the water utilities company's land in exchange for use rights fees paid on a yearly basis. Soon, however, the practice of allowing people to set up shelters in exchange for fees got out of hand and the company abruptly ended the practice. Nonetheless, people continued moving into the area, with their numbers increasing in certain portions. At present, the Lookan settlement is made up of seven areas, each additional portion being more blighted and crowded than the previous ones ("Brando", personal communication, August 10, 2010).

The second depressed area, the Labrador Community of Nayon is now home to around 7,000 people (P. Abesamis, personal communication, September 5, 2010) and hundreds of structures that lie along part of the property of the University of the Philippines (UP). Its current state actually belies its agrarian beginnings. Blessed with fertile soil, Labrador in the 1970s was a tobacco experimental station managed by the National Tobacco Administration (NTA) under a five-year agreement with UP. Since they were assigned to do guard duty on the site, Alberto, a long-time resident of the community, and four other security guards of the NTA, requested their supervisors that they be allowed to settle in the area with their families. While the approval of such an appeal addressed the short-term security concerns of the NTA, the consequences of providing such privileges proved costly in the long run. The guards subsequently invited relatives and friends to live in the area. Some were allowed to settle on the assumption that they were to plant vegetables as their means of livelihood. The condition specified

that part of their produce would be handed over to those who had allowed them access to the place ("Alberto", personal communication, August 9, 2010).

Eventually, the guards and other residents encouraged further entries without the permission of their "patrons". Just about anyone who wanted to build a house inside Labrador did so especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After the fall of the Marcos Regime, "houses started to sprout like mushrooms", commented Alberto, as people from the provinces flocked to Metro Manila in the hope that the Aquino government would grant them tenure (Shatkin, 2006). Asked why he, as one of the pioneers had allowed this to happen, Alberto replied: *"Wala naman akong karapatan na huwag silang payagan na maghanap ng puwestong matitirhan dito. Paano ko naman gagawin yun e hindi naman ako ang may-ari ng lugar?"* ("I have no right to prevent anyone from staking a claim within the area. How could I do so when I don't own the place?")

The third area, the estimated four-hectare Mehan Community, which is located between major thoroughfares Quezon Avenue and the Bureau of Internal Revenue Road and is a short walk away from the Philippine Children's Medical Center, the Bureau of Internal Revenue and the National Power Corporation, sits on prime urban public land owned by the National Housing Authority. According to Jograd, a long-time resident, the place used to be a tree and shrub-filled area that formed the outer edges of what used to be a plant and zoological garden. This public recreational area was allegedly given to a certain Father Osmundo Aguilar by then First Lady Imelda Marcos for him to develop and manage. Jograd recalled that when he and his wife, a niece of the late Fr. Aguilar's driver, were allowed by the priest to set up a house in Mehan in 1991, there were already a few families there. Fr. Aguilar had allowed them to settle near the area, most of them being relatives of the priest's employees ("Jograd", personal communication, September 2, 2010).

Similar to the experience of the Labrador Community located a few kilometers away, people came in large numbers in the 1990s. By 2004, a census taken by the NHA indicated that roughly 2,000 structures were already crammed inside their community, in addition to the existing houses, businesses and local government-funded buildings there. At some point, they heard that the area had been included in a string of demolitions planned by the city government to make way for Quezon City's new central business district ("Jograd").

ECONOMIC AND RESIDENTIAL SPACES WITHIN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: VISIBLE OUTCOMES OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

The Philippine planning system categorizes the use of land in the country into policy areas, which includes settlements - spaces for living - and production land use - spaces for making a living (Serote, 2009). Settlement lands are those areas utilized for housing and other linked activities (i.e., schools, parks, markets, malls, health facilities), while spaces for making a living are associated with commercial and industrial areas. Conventionally, these settlements where people live, work and play are properties of either private individuals or government entities and are under the jurisdiction of government regulatory boards.

Yet, in reality, land parcels can be utilized as economic and residential spaces by those who do not own them, such as informal settlers who appear to violate the rights of the owners and breach the policies and programs of the authorities. Created and maintained by resource-poor people, an informal settlement can be considered as one of the more vivid results of daily resistance to elite interests as its residents practice ways of appropriating, utilizing, trading, negotiating and even protecting these precious spaces within their communities. Few if any benefits accrue to its legal owners. Without any formal assessments or development regulations (e.g. integration of informal settlements in land use plans and zoning ordinances), both the state and legal claimants lose out.

Slum-Based Businesses as Both Part of the 'Untaxable Economy' and a Product of 'Playing Ball' with the Authorities

Informal settlements are places filled with ambulant vendors and the ubiquitous *sari-sari* or general merchandise stores (Jocano, 1975), where every space available is made to offer goods and services (Pollack, 2009). While these establishments nestled in both permanent and temporary places seem innocuous to their patrons and owners as ways of making a living, they are viewed by government institutions as violations of their rules and authority. In that sense, businesses located in the settlements that I studied can be seen as manifestations of resistance against the authorities for the following reasons: a) being "illegal", they cannot be taxed, b) community members zone their neighborhoods without the supervision and approval of the authorities;

and c) these informal enterprises even have the ability to derail government-sponsored and regulated commercial areas.

Starke (1996, pp. 10-11) notes that a former government official once remarked that businesses in depressed areas are part of the "untaxable economy" or "enterprises that do not pay taxes, do not keep records and do not follow the law" since these businesses are located on illegally occupied land. Taxing them would legitimize not only the businesses of owners but also their existence in such a settlement. Thus, left alone by any regulating body, businesses thrive in Lookan, Labrador and Mehan.

In Labrador alone, there are roughly ninety business establishments primarily providing for the needs of its 7,000 plus residents. This is only slightly below the 107 legally-registered businesses in the barangay (Office of Barangay Nayon, 2009). While sari-sari stores stand almost next to each other, observed to be the norm in many informal settlements (Berner, 1997; Racelis and Aguirre, 2005), there are commercial activities, all not registered with the Quezon City Government, which one would not usually imagine as being part of the slum landscape. At least five establishments are located in various portions of the area that are wholesalers of bottled soft drinks, alcoholic beverages and even finger-food snacks.

Emma, who owns a spacious warehouse filled with assorted sodas and beer explains, while completing a transaction with a supplier, that her business has been operational for the past few years and is very profitable ("Emma", personal communication, August 9, 2010). In addition, there are several establishments selling affordable home-cooked meals located along the entrance to the settlement that serves the needs of employees of nearby government offices. It is said that the latter favor these eateries over the duly-registered but more expensive fast food joints and canteens in a nearby commercial mall ("Minda", personal communication, August 9, 2010).

The inability of government offices to impose taxes and fees on these slum-based businesses also creates opportunities for its inhabitants to establish businesses similar to those in formal settlements. As they usually operate free of permits and other fees, these enterprises can offer their services at significantly lower rates. According to Minda, a former field coordinator for a local politician, Labrador now has a dental clinic that offers cheaper tooth-cleaning and filling

Figures 4 and 5. Female owners of a soda and beer warehouse and a home-cooked meals business in Labrador proudly pose in front of their enterprises.

services than conventional clinics ("Minda"). The same can be observed in Mehan's eight internet cafes, whose legal internet connections and computer operations without city business permits allow its owners to offer hourly use rates that are half of those in duly-registered shops. A businessman even took advantage of the proximity of Mehan to government institutions such as the National Power Corporation, Philippine Children's Medical Center and the Bureau of Internal Revenue to set up a thriving laundry business within the perimeter space of the site straddling a main road: *"Galing sa iba-ibang lugar ang mga kliyente ko. Yung iba taga-dito pero may mga kostumer din akong empleyado sa BIR at Napocor at pati mga kamag-anak ng mga pasiyente na naka-confine sa Children's Medical."* ("My customers come from different places. Some are from the community, but I also have clients from BIR, Napocor and even from relatives of patients staying at Children's Medical.") ("Winston", personal communication, September 2, 2010)

This does not mean, however, that informal settlement-based business owners are able to take up their own economic spaces and operate without paying any fees. Unfortunately, many of these establishments are able to operate because they pay "fees" to lower level or village-based government officials:

"Gusto ko talaga na makakuha ng permit sa DTI at Quezon City Para sa negosyo ko, gusto ko talaga. Kaso mo sinabihan akong mga kakilala ko sa City Hall na pag ginawa ko yun, magkakaproblema ako. Kaya pinayuhan nalang nila ako na kumuha nalang ng lisensiya mula sa barangay." ("I really want to get Department of Trade and Industry and Quezon City permits

Figure 6. An internet gaming shop in Mehan, Barangay Piedra.

for my business, I really do. But I was advised by people whom I know at City Hall that doing so would put me in a lot of trouble. So they advised me to do the next best thing which is to get a permit from the barangay.") ("Juanito", personal communication, September 2, 2010)

City governments may not record the existence of these slum-based businesses nor do they collect any permits or fees from them (Quezon City Urban Poor Affairs Office Census Form, no date). However, the barangay or village governments that have jurisdiction over them do seem to consider these businesses as additional sources of revenue. This leads to a situation wherein enterprising members of depressed areas who simply want to make ends meet, unfortunately, have to "play ball" with lower level authorities. These, according to some respondents, include the police. While in no way are such extra-legal dealings a reflection of the urban poor's resistance against the regulations of the state and the market economy, such forms of illicit assessments may be difficult to separate from the realities of those who are trying to eke out a living in depressed communities.

In the case of Barangay Piedra, whose village government has jurisdiction over the Mehan community, it was rumored that one of its former heads assessed monthly "taxes" from all businesses at rates based on the type and size of the enterprise ("Michael", personal communication, September 2, 2010). On the other hand, in Labrador along Barangay Nayon, ambulant vendors who take up positions along the entrance to the community near the legitimate market place are said to pay the barangay a P10 ticket each day that they sell their wares there, while those who want access to choice commercial spots deal with certain policemen ("Minda"). In Lookan, Rita, a field coordinator in the area, mentioned that a barangay collector receives monthly dues from business owners. She even shared with pride that she was responsible for helping an acquaintance get a stall space in one of Lookan's *talipapa* or wet market, by brokering a meeting between that businessperson and the previous barangay captain:

> *"Kung mayroong interesadong magka-puwesto sa talipapa, kailangan makuha niya ang suporta ng barangay captain. May isa nga, kakilala ko lang na nanghingi ng tulong sa akin na magkausap sila noong dating nakaupo na kapitan at nagawan ko naman ng paraan."*("If one wants to get a slot in the *talipapa*, that person had to get the approval and support of the barangay captain. There was this person, an acquaintance who asked that I help her set up a meeting with who was then the former barangay captain, and I found a way to set up their meeting.") ("Rita", personal communication, August 9, 2010)

Locating and Managing Economic Spaces in Slum Areas: Do-It-Yourself Urban Planning

Similar to their counterparts in formal settlements, residential populations in depressed areas also attract services called residential linkages (i.e., food establishments, entertainment centers, educational facilities) (Serote, 2009) in order to fulfill household needs. Since the inhabitants of slums do not formally own any portion of such settlements and the government will not legitimize their claim by laying out plans for the proper allocation of commercial land uses in such places, settlers forge agreements among themselves on how to apportion, use, locate and even dispose of and inherit parcels in their communities. These arrangements are usually honored by those who live there. Despite their individual desire to access a resource, and consistent with the weapons of the weak, informal settlers have used their informal networks to formulate unofficial and informal

"extra-legal property agreements" (De Soto, 2001, par. 20) that help them manage the available resources in their community with minimal conflict.

Similar to other informal settlements in Metro Manila, residents of the three communities tend to position their businesses so as to be in the forefront of getting the attention of people with buying power – those who work in nearby offices or those who are just arriving from a day's work. Located near three government institutions, Mehan's wet and dry goods market stalls and service shops, including beauty parlors and barbershops, internet cafes, a bakery, a laundry shop and a hardware store, are located in front of major roads, the Bureau of Internal Revenue and Quezon Avenues.

Minda points out that Labrador's Sycamore Street, which is the area's main entrance from Commonwealth Avenue, also functions as the main commercial

Figure 7. A talipapa in Mehan, Barangay Piedra. The fresh produce sections of this depressed area's commercial zone comes to life from late afternoon to early evening as people come back from their jobs and buy food to be cooked during dinner.

zone of the community. It features temporary spots at the front end of the road, where men and women, most of whom are Muslim, sell sunglasses, cellular phone chargers, compact discs, battery-operated toys, underwear and slippers. A thriving wet market zone exists along nearby Fir Street. While the businesses along Sycamore also include fresh food stalls, Minda explains that the talipapa along Fir caters to customers who travel through this pathway which also functions as the gateway to the populous eastern portion of the community. Thus, the network of fresh food stands which come to life on weekdays from 3:00 PM to 7:00 PM, serves as the place where those returning from work pick up ingredients needed to cook their supper ("Minda").

The existence of these commercial zones in informal settlements that are distinct from but closely linked to their respective housing areas disputes the notion that such places are bereft of any form of organization and order when it comes to managing precious space. In addition, these business areas, owing to their strategic locations, have the capacity to compete against and eat into the potential profits of proximate legitimate public and privately owned commercial sites. The view of Labrador from Commonwealth Avenue is actually obstructed by a pink-colored public market whose main customers would logically include the residents of Labrador. Ironically, the businesses along the community's main streets behind the said market duplicate and are in direct competition with the establishments found in the said facility. These stalls are said to take business away from the public market along the main road.

What makes Labrador's commercial section even more distinctive emerges in the portion that directly fronts part of the public market. Minda recalls that although demolished by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) a few years ago, former stall owners, both in order to continue earning and minimize losses, rebuilt their shops on their own the moment they felt it was safe to do so ("Minda"). In a sense, the Labrador merchants' resistance mirrors Scott's assertion that subordinate groups "require little or explicit coordination to conduct… [such a] struggle, for the simple imperative of making a tolerable living is enough to make them dig in their heels." (Scott, 1985, p. 256).

Studies show that as both residential and commercial spaces in informal settlements have become very valuable pieces of real estate, members of these communities have come to accept certain rules with respect to their use,

acquisition, disposition and inheritance. An informal property system (De Soto, 2001) is thus in effect, one that is recognized only within the confines of these communities. Reportedly, the five to ten square meter fixed stalls near the legal public market that function as Labrador's grocery section can be rented out for anywhere between P2,000 to P3,000 (roughly $45-68 USD at an exchange rate of P44:$1 USD) a month. The newest establishment in this section, a dental clinic that accepts clients only on a per appointment basis, is being rented out for P4,500 or a little more than $100 USD a month. The rights over these stalls are very much recognized within Labrador as these can also be passed on to one's children or next of kin ("Minda"). As a rule, those who "own" these "commercial real estate properties" are either those who arrived first in the area ("Alberto") or who have connections with the authorities, especially the police ("Minda"). The influence of law enforcement groups in the appropriation of space in the area was supported by Robbie, a former policeman whose beat included the Labrador area ("Robbie", personal communication, August 10, 2010).

Like commercial spaces found in regular markets and commercial areas, similar informal spaces can be sold for cash or even used as collateral. Alberto estimates that a stall can fetch anywhere from P30,000 to P40,000 ($680 to $900 USD). He regrets that, being a pioneer occupant of the place, the rights he used to have over a commercial parcel in the past had to be sold to pay off his personal expenses ("Alberto").

Managing, Negotiating and Protecting Residential Spaces in Informal Settlements

Lefebrve (1991) argues that space can be classified into conceived and lived spaces. The former represents notions of what space ought to be and how it is to be utilized and managed from the perspective of both the experts and the authorities. Such conceptions of space usually become the dominant view in society. In reality, however, the ways in which society's socioeconomically deprived members make use of particular spaces that are part and parcel of their daily lives may be different from what has been prescribed for them. It is in these lived spaces where people from the margins contest and resist the policies and practices of the authorities.

Informal settlements are one of the more noticeable lived spaces of the urban poor that both the more economically advantaged groups and the state perceive

as being the opposite of what an orderly human settlement should be. In an attempt to promote orderly and livable settlements, the Philippine government, through its Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board, implements laws. Presidential Decree 957, for example, mandates standards with respect to road types, sidewalk lengths, open space-ratios as well as community facilities (i.e., playgrounds, chapels, community centers, schools) that private developers should adhere to and provide in their subdivision projects (Philippine Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board, 2001).

This does not mean, however, that informal settlement residents do not make attempts to improve their living conditions, nor are their settlements bereft of vital social services. In fact, many slum dwellers, such as those in Lookan, Mehan and Labrador, have found ways to establish and access basic services and amenities. Despite their being neglected and harassed by the authorities, they have devised ways to protect their assets from a variety of hazards. This includes fire prevention (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005), flood escape routes, community walkways and bridges over swampy areas, basketball courts, chapels and community centers.

Unconventional means of accessing basic services as a form of everyday resistance

Since residents of depressed areas do not hold any legal title over the spaces they occupy, companies that provide water, electricity and telecommunications services in formal settlements have recently not been very willing to provide such amenities. In Mehan, telephone companies no longer accept applications for new connections ("Mart", personal communication, September 2, 2010).

While utilities firms would, in specific instances, still provide their services in informal settlements, their requirements make it difficult and tedious for would-be applicants. In lieu of a proof of billing, an informal settler has to apply for such a connection along with a certain number of households. They then would have to submit an application letter together with certifications of residence from the concerned barangay government and make a mandatory deposit (Manila Electric Company, n.d.). Recognizing the difficulty of getting a legal water connection, Lookan's barangay government has already posted a note on its bulletin board informing residents of the steps they need to go through to acquire such a service.

The amount of work needed to apply for a service connection may have led other dwellers simply to access these resources through other means. Although some slum dwellers would get their water and electricity through illegal connections, some access basic utilities by establishing sub-connections via their neighbors or slumlords who obtained legal connections when utilities firms were still lax with their requirements. Alberto calls these acts of allowing neighbors access to utilities as outward manifestations of *pakikisama* or getting along with others. Yet he also admits, together with other informants, that some individuals do make a little profit by imposing a mark-up in the value of the utilities consumed by those who are using sub-meters. ("Alberto"; "Mart"). Nonetheless, the ability to obtain such services by defiantly going around the requirements set by utilities firms wary of illegal residential statuses can already be considered as acts of resistance or insurgence (Knudsen, 2007) against policies that attempt to deprive informal settlements of such amenities.

Like their property-owning counterparts, informal settlers also want to have certain facilities within their communities. The latter are said to exploit their potential for delivering votes to get short-term concessions from politicians, especially before elections (Shatkin, 2006).

However, field observations and key informant interviews in the three informal settlements indicate that slum communities are actually capable of accessing relatively permanent basic services from elected officials in a manner that is no longer dependent on the cycle of political campaigns and elections. As such, they have been able to use relations they cultivated with individuals and institutions that are in power to "bolster their resources" (Kerkvliet, 1991, p. 14). The infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects that informal settler groups and barangay politicians have been able to acquire from individuals and agencies of the Quezon City Government, in particular, are important for several reasons. In lieu of title to their lands, informal settlers feel that the basic infrastructure services (i.e. roads, deep wells, multipurpose halls, day care centers) that are constructed in their communities give a certain degree of legitimacy to their claim to the place ("Alberto"; "Minda"). In addition, unlike the disaster literature which indicates that economically disadvantaged people have difficulty obtaining services from concerned institutions (Fothergill, Darlington, and Maestas, 1999), informal settlers can utilize their numbers and their networks to get concessions addressing their pressing

concerns. Moreover, their capacity to choose appropriate sites for their buildings and facilities becomes even more impressive when one considers the few spaces available in these areas. This ability is, in fact, emblematic of their ability to engage in conflict (Berner, 1997) with those who legally own the spaces they occupy.

Infrastructure projects are usually solicited from elected city officials by either a particular neighborhood association or the barangay local officials themselves ("Alberto"; "Michael"). The public mortuary constructed in Labrador, however, reportedly came from the funds of a Philippine senator ("Minda"). Unless a project site is clearly understood to be a flood-prone area, dark alley or dirt path, the selection of sites for specific projects has no clear locational system. More often than not, site-selection decisions are made on a "wherever there is available space" basis ("Alberto"). In any case, informal settlers generally seem to find space for any service or amenity that they deem useful.

Protecting Lives and Property in Informal Settlements

Not only are the informal settlers of Lookan, Mehan and Labrador capable of exploiting opportunities to improve their living conditions by negotiating for basic services. They also employ ways of protecting these facilities and their homes from hazards partly brought about by haphazard and unregulated physical development. In no other type of danger have their capabilities been brought forth more strongly than in repulsing fires, said to be the most common threat to life and property in depressed areas (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005).

The last fire that broke out in Labrador in March 26, 2005 destroyed clusters of houses along the main entrance to the community. Those who remember the fire point to a then existing junk shop as the source of the accident; the fire that started there quickly spread to adjacent dwellings. Unfortunately, it was difficult to put out the fire as the path that firefighters could have used was clogged with vehicles and other obstructions. The destructive effects of the fire and the reasons why it was not put out soon enough compelled barangay officials to enact an ordinance prohibiting any vehicles and structures from blocking the path of the main road. Such a policy would allow people a clear escape route from the community in the event of another fire as well as permit firefighters to do their jobs effectively ("Alberto").

While Labrador has come up with policy measures to protect residents from fires, the people of Mehan rely on their members' sense of community fostered by a high degree of closeness among its members (Berner, 1997; Laquian, 1968) to put out blazes. This cohesiveness is best reflected in Mart's beaming with pride while emphasizing that he and his neighbors would rush to put out a fire before even thinking of fleeing:

> *"May bahay malapit dito na biglang nagkaapoy. Kahit yung mga nakatira sa Forestry ay pumunta dito na may dalang mga sariling hagdan at timba. Dito sa amin, hindi kami tumatakas agad. Ginagawa namin ang lahat para maisalba ang anumang meron kami. Mas mabilis pa nga kaming umaksyon kaysa mga bumbero eh."* ("There was a house nearby that started to catch fire. Even people as far away as the Forestry area (another informal settlement) came over here with ladders and pails. Here, we don't escape immediately. We try our best to save what we have…We actually react a lot faster than the firemen.") ("Mart")

DISCUSSION

The struggle between privileged and disadvantaged groups and institutions commonly occurs in a particular place (Scott, 1985). An increasingly scarce resource such as urban land has become the site of conflicts between the state and private landowners, on the one hand, and the urban poor, on the other. For the most part, low-income individuals have silently found ways to appropriate for themselves private and government-owned portions of urban areas. The establishment of an informal settlement, a clear spatial outcome of a marginalized sector's use of space available to them that is usually achieved not through direct land invasion but via steady and unnoticed accumulation, marks only the beginning of the reflections of their resistance and struggle to claim and appropriate for themselves scarce living space. An even more striking manifestation of resistance is the ability of slum residents to seemingly contradict the notions of more dominant groups regarding property and modernity, the primacy of market forces in distributing resources as well as the tax and regulatory powers of the government through their ability to develop, manage and protect their communities over time.

The communities of Lookan, Labrador and Mehan in Quezon City are imprints of its residents' continuing, albeit silent and, more often, unobtrusive

spatial resistance. Their occupancy of a site usually without the expressed consent of its owners combined with their depriving the latter of their legal right to use and dispose of their land assets can be considered an act of insurgence as it imposes limits to capitalist ideas (Kerkvliet, 1991). The failure of local governments to tax businesses whose proprietors have no legal claim on the land where their establishments are situated can also be viewed as an act of resistance as it opposes the state's power to assess revenue from profitable endeavors within its territory. Moreover, the ability of informal settlers to arrange land uses in their communities, informally agree on how to acquire and dispose of "properties" within their settlements, access basic services from public and private entities easily available to residences with secure tenure, and to find ways of managing and protecting lives and property within their respective areas constitutes not only expressions of implicit and silent challenges against the dominant structures of society, but it also demonstrates the ability of the underprivileged to question popular notions about informal settlements and its inhabitants.

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END NOTES

[1] These three aforementioned place-names are pseudonyms of the communities that were part of this study. The actual names of these places, the streets within these communities as well as the barangays (villages) that have jurisdiction over them will not be revealed in order to protect key informants who have recounted illegal dealings that they claim have been or are being conducted by local officials and security officials in these areas.